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DCF and Lead Agencies Have Made Progress in Reducing Barriers to Successful Adoptions

at a glance

The Department of Children and Families and lead agencies have addressed many of our prior recommendations to reduce barriers to successful adoptions. The department and lead agencies have implemented strategies that have contributed to increasing the number of adoptions over the last four years and have made several changes to address potential adoptive families' frustrations. However, lead agencies have made limited progress in complying with requirements to update online information about children available for adoption.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Children and Families in response to a 2008 OPPAGA report that examined how community-based care lead agencies contract with adoption agencies and seek successful placements of foster children with adoptive families.^{1, 2}

¹ *Additional Strategies Would Help Address the Barriers to Successful Adoptions*, OPPAGA [Report No. 08-06](#), January 2008.

² Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

Background

Adoption is a permanency option the state considers when foster children cannot be safely reunified with their biological parents. Most children available for adoption from the state's child welfare program are considered special needs children.³

Adoption program responsibilities are divided among the Department of Children and Families, community-based care lead agencies, and subcontracted providers. The department is responsible for program planning; informing lead agency staff about changes in law, rules, and policies and procedures; and training lead agency adoption staff. The 20 community-based care lead agencies provide child protective services, including adoption services, in the state's 67 counties. To implement their adoption programs, some lead agencies subcontract for services, while others provide services using their own staff, or use a combination of in-house staff and subcontractors.

³ Special needs children meet at least one of the following criteria: at least eight years old; developmentally disabled; physically handicapped; emotionally handicapped; black or of racially mixed heritage; a member of a sibling group being placed for adoption together; or has significant emotional ties with the foster parents.

The department and lead agencies finalized 3,777 foster child adoptions in Fiscal Year 2008-09. As of April 30, 2010, 833 children were available for adoption. According to department data, in Fiscal Year 2008-09, 32% of finalized adoptions were with foster parents and 44% were with the child's relatives. Families recruited by lead agencies or their subcontractors accounted for the remaining 24% of finalized adoptions. The department estimates that the lead agencies spent approximately \$170 million on their adoption programs (not including maintenance adoption subsidy payments to families) in Fiscal Year 2008-09. However, this figure is an estimate because lead agencies are not required to track or report all of these expenditures.⁴

Current Status

The department and lead agencies have implemented many of our prior recommendations to reduce barriers to successful adoptions. They are using strategies that have increased the number of adoptions over the last four years and developed ways to track and support post-adoptive families. The department and lead agencies also have addressed problems causing frustration for potential adoptive families. However, lead agencies have made limited progress in complying with requirements to update online information about children available for adoption.

The department and lead agencies have implemented strategies to recruit more adoptive families. Consistent with our prior recommendations, the department and lead agencies made several changes to help find permanent homes for more children. For

example, they expanded the availability of heart galleries and initiated the Longest Waiting Teens project, which helped find homes for 38 of the 103 longest waiting teens in the state's foster care system.⁵ Lead agencies also continue to promote adoption through brochures, public service announcements, and speaking engagements.

In addition, the department collaborated with the Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection to launch the Explore Adoption website. This website helps educate the public about the benefits of adopting foster children and provides information about children available for adoption and the adoption process.

The department also addressed our recommendation to enhance 'home finder' conference calls with lead agency adoption staff to now require discussion of two hard-to-place children and one potential adoptive family each month. This allows staff to exchange information to help match families and hard-to-place children unable to find matches in their local area.

These efforts helped increase the number of finalized adoptions from 3,079 in Fiscal Year 2006-07 to 3,777 in Fiscal Year 2008-09. The federal government recognized Florida's performance and awarded the state approximately \$10 million at the end of Fiscal Year 2008-09 through the federal Adoption Incentive Grant, which is given to states that increase the number of children adopted from the foster care system. The department primarily used the funding to help fill gaps in its budget for maintenance adoption subsidies.

⁴ Lead agencies receive a set amount of funding each fiscal year, the majority of which can be used for multiple child welfare purposes at the discretion of lead agencies. Lead agencies are not required to track the amounts spent on adoption, and case management expenditures for children with the goal of adoption are comingled with other case management activities. However, they are required to track the portion of adoption expenditures funded by Title IV-B, Part II, Safe and Stable Families federal grants.

⁵ Heart galleries are locally supported traveling events and websites that display professional photographs of foster children available for adoption. The primary purposes of heart galleries are to find adoptive homes and promote public awareness of the need for more families to adopt foster children.

The department has developed systems for tracking troubled adoptive placements to strengthen post-adoption permanency. As we previously recommended, the department has continued developing a system to track post-adoption services when families call and request help in stabilizing troubled placements. Department administrators expect that the Florida Safe Families Network will begin documenting the services provided to post-adoptive families by July 1, 2010. The department plans to use this information to determine what types of services lead agencies provide, whether certain areas in the state need additional post-adoption employees, and whether there are service gaps.

The department also addressed our recommendation to link abuse and neglect allegations with former foster children. In August 2009, the department created a component within the Florida Safe Families Network that allows lead agencies to create and maintain post-adoption case records for all families receiving maintenance adoption subsidies. This system alerts child protective investigators when an abuse or neglect allegation involves a child adopted from the state's foster care system, which allows investigators to coordinate with local adoption staff to provide the family services. The goal of these efforts is to prevent adoption dissolutions when appropriate.

Lead agencies have dedicated positions or contracted for staff to better support adoptive families. As recommended, more lead agencies established positions devoted to linking families with post-adoption services. Agencies did so by creating new positions solely for this purpose, shifting the work to current employees as a percentage of their time, or subcontracting for this service. The department amended lead agency contracts as of July 1, 2010, to require lead agencies to designate a contact person for post-adoption services.

The department and the lead agencies have generally improved adoption-related information on their websites. As recommended in our 2008 report, the department and the Office of Adoption and Child Protection launched the Explore Adoption website, which helps potential adoptive parents by providing more detailed information about adoption and county lead agency contact information. However, the website does not yet link to all lead agency websites.

In addition, lead agencies made changes to improve the adoption-related information on their websites. These changes include detailed descriptions of the adoption process, schedules of local parenting classes, contact information, and instructions on how to find information on children available for adoption.⁶

The department, lead agencies, and Office of Adoption and Child Protection have developed a customer service protocol. The department, lead agencies, and Office of Adoption and Child Protection established a policy addressing our recommendation that adoption staff return calls within 72 hours. The protocol also requires the Florida Adoption Information Center, which serves as the statewide portal for potential adoptive families, to contact lead agencies to determine whether staff are following this policy.

Lead agencies have developed more ways to support potential adoptive families trying to navigate the adoption process. Since our prior report, lead agencies are more widely using initiatives to keep potential adoptive families informed and involved throughout the adoption process. For example, lead agencies are conducting matching events that give potential adoptive families and children available for adoption the opportunity to interact. Lead agencies also send newsletters and encourage participation in local adoption

⁶ Parenting classes are called Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting. These classes are designed to prepare potential adoptive parents in how to address the special needs of children in foster care and to self-evaluate their ability to provide a home to one of these children.

support groups. In addition, lead agencies have revised parenting classes to inform potential adoptive parents about how children come into the foster care system, the types of trauma these children may have experienced, and the types of behaviors children may exhibit.

The department and lead agencies also implemented the Office of Adoption and Child Protection's recommendation to hold adoption orientation classes. These classes provide families with an overview of the adoption process and requirements for adoptive parents. The department also addressed the office's recommendation to standardize home studies statewide so that one study would suffice for both potential foster parents and adoptive families.⁷

Lead agencies have made limited progress in complying with requirements to update online information on children available for adoption. Although we recommended that lead agencies update online biographies and pictures of children at least annually and/or when a child's case status changes and ensure that such changes occur timely, profiles on the Explore Adoption website continue to include out-of-date information or lack required elements. Some lead agency staff we interviewed

reported that they review the children's online profiles monthly to ensure accuracy. However, when we viewed child profiles on the website on March 30, 2010, we concluded that 121 of 634 profiles (19%) contained out-of-date pictures or biographical information, did not include a child's picture, and/or did not include pictures of siblings available for adoption as a group.⁸

Moreover, lead agencies have made limited progress in addressing our recommendation to improve compliance with statutory requirements to place children on the Explore Adoption website within 30 days of their legal eligibility for adoption. Lead agency staff has only slightly increased the percentage of children added to the website within the 30-day requirement, from 45% in Fiscal Year 2006-07 to 53% in August 2009.⁹

We continue to recommend that the department and lead agencies coordinate efforts to ensure that information on the Explore Adoption website is current and accurate.

⁸ Our 2008 analysis of online child profiles was based on data exported from the Adoption Exchange System. Child profiles in the system previously contained a record of when information was updated, but the department did not maintain a history of updates when it incorporated the system into the Florida Safe Families Network, nor does the network maintain information on updates made since the change in data systems.

⁹ The department was unable to retrieve more recent data for our analysis because this information is not maintained in the Florida Safe Families Network.

⁷ Home studies assess the health of family relationships, the family's financial stability, and reasons for seeking an adoption. Assessments are based on interviews with family members, references, and an in-home evaluation of living conditions.

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